

## Early Learning Council/K-12 Advisory Committee Joint Workgroup Report to Early Learning Council

### Charge to Workgroup

The Joint Workgroup was created by the Early Learning Council and the K-12 Advisory Committee to look at areas of common interest, develop shared goals, and make recommendations for achieving shared goals.

### Context for Work

In its November 2005 Interim Report, the Washington Learns Steering Committee posed eight core questions to guide the development of a world-class, learner-focused education system. The first question is: “Are all children entering kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life?”

This core question is consistent with the Early Learning Council’s vision for early learning: “To create a sustainable, integrated and accessible early learning system that provides parents, families, caregivers and communities in Washington State with the information, support and services to ensure that every child is prepared from birth for success in school and life.”

The Council reinforced this vision with a series of goals, the first two of which are:

- Parents are supported as their children’s first teachers and primary decision makers and have an array of early learning choices including family, friend and neighbor care;
- All children, including children with special needs, are ready for school and schools are ready for children.

Similarly, the K-12 Advisory Committee’s draft recommendations to the Washington Learns Steering Committee include the following Goal 1:

- All students will enter kindergarten with the interpersonal, language, early literacy, and thinking skills needed to succeed.

### Common Goal, Key Assumptions and Guiding Question

Given the core question posed by the Washington Learns Steering Committee the vision and goals of the Early Learning Council, and the goals of the K-12 Advisory Committee, the Joint Workgroup quickly established the overall common goal of school readiness – i.e., children ready for school and schools ready for children.

Early in its deliberations, the Joint Workgroup also established two key assumptions:

1. Parent and family engagement is the foundation upon which school success is built. Parents and families must be supported as their children's first and most important teachers.
2. Seamless connections between a child's pre-school-age and out-of-school time environments and school are critical. It should be easy for children and families to move from one setting to another, regardless of where a child is coming from.

With these assumptions in mind, the Joint Workgroup then used the following question to guide their conversation:

"When parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools are working together to support children's development and success in school, what will we see?"

The following eight distinguishing features were identified:

**1. There is a true partnership of parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools, characterized by mutual respect and trust.**

Parents, child care and early learning providers, and K-12 educators have equal footing and come to the table as equals. In addition, they learn from each other – i.e., parents are encouraged to share their expertise on their children and their development, child care and early learning providers broaden K-3 teachers' understanding of child development, and K-3 teachers broaden parents' and child care and early learning providers' understanding of the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school.

**2. Parents and families are empowered to help their children succeed in school.**

Child care and early learning providers and K-12 educators demonstrate their belief that parents are their children's first and most important teacher by actively engaging them in their children's early learning and on-going education. The best way to do this is by asking parents what they need to support their children's development and then ensuring that families have access to culturally appropriate tools and resources to help them prepare their children for school. This requires reaching out to families on their terms, in ways that recognize cultural differences and the fact that many parents have had negative experiences in school.

### **3. Schools and child care and early learning providers actively help entering kindergartners and their families make smooth transitions to school and between school and out-of-school-time care.**

The goal is to facilitate communication between parents, other caregivers, and a child's teacher. The specific vehicle used to do this will vary – e.g., it could be a portfolio demonstrating the child's skills and knowledge and/or it could be a conversation between a child's parents, other care provider and teacher. What's important is the opportunity to come together and share information on incoming kindergartners – who they are and how they learn – and using that information to create appropriate learning environments for all children.

Schools can also take advantage of opportunities to encourage parents of pre-school-age children to get to know their children's schools before they enter kindergarten. For example, community-sponsored programs such as read and play groups operated out of schools are very effective in encouraging parents to become familiar with a school and its environment.

Special note should be made of the role child care providers may play in helping children eligible for special education services make smooth transitions to school. Child care providers are often second only to a child's parent in their knowledge of that child's development and their responsibility for creating that child's out-of-school-time learning environment. Subject to parent approval, child care providers serving IDEA-eligible children should be invited to participate in IEP conferences and written into the plans as appropriate.

### **4. New attitudes among child care and early learning providers and public school educators are reflected in their beliefs and actions.**

All public school educators and child care and early learning providers:

- Recognize that a child's early years comprise a continuum of growth and development (rather than view birth to age 5 and kindergarten to grade 3 as separate, unconnected phases of child's life).
- Define school readiness as children ready for schools and schools ready for children.
- Understand the importance of social/emotional learning as a critical component of children's readiness for school.
- Reach out to one another as respected professionals with valued expertise.
- Recognize and take full advantage of tribal early learning expertise and resources.

- Support efforts to increase the quality of child care and early learning programs and K-3 education.
- View schools as community centers, providing and/or offering space for family and other caregiver support services.

**5. Effective school-child and early learning provider partnerships result in the sharing of resources.**

For example, schools could:

- Invite children and families served by child care and early learning providers to attend age-appropriate school events;
- Offer surplus materials to child care and early learning providers;
- Invite child care and early learning providers to participate in book fairs and other events where materials can be purchased for a discount;
- Create materials loan programs and joint purchasing opportunities;
- Offer training opportunities for child care and early learning providers, including joint training with kindergarten teachers;
- Provide transportation to and from school from and to child care.

Child care and early learning providers could:

- Prepare and share information on entering kindergartners;
- Invite other providers and kindergarten teachers to participate in training programs they conduct.
- Invite K-12 educators to child care and early learning events.

**6. Child care and early learning provider and school partnerships are part of wider community collaborations that support child development and success in school.**

Potential community partners include: local government (city, county, other municipalities), child care resource and referral programs, educational service districts, libraries, parks districts, health departments, civic and service organizations, and economic development councils.

**7. The result of the community collaborations are locally appropriate solutions, based on best practices and promoting aligned efforts focused on what works for children and families.**

**8. Child outcome and program assessment data are used to continuously improve the quality of early learning and K-3 approaches and practices.**

Policies and Practices in Support of Desired Partnership

As part of its discussion of how parents, child care and early learning providers, and schools can work together to support children's development and success in school, the Joint Workgroup identified promising practices as well as potential

changes in policies that would support their common goal. Many of the promising practices are noted above, including viewing schools as community centers; providing transportation between school and child care; and actively sharing resources, particularly training and professional development opportunities.

Other ideas that were discussed but not fully explored include the following:

- For districts able to access state construction dollars, allow the square footage dedicated to early learning and after-school programs to be included in the formula used to calculate the state contribution.
- Revise child care licensing requirements to make it easier for schools to provide appropriate places for after-school care. (Note: This may be an issue that the Regulatory TAC could address.)
- Support kindergarten teachers' ability to support smooth transitions for children and families by providing supplemental days designated for meeting with parents of incoming children (either at school or as home visits) and creating personalized transition plans for each entering kindergartner and family.
- Support child care and early learning providers and kindergarten teachers' ability to create quality learning environments birth through kindergarten by sharing with each other child development and assessment data for children who enter kindergarten from a formal child care/early learning environment.
- Use new state mandate that all schools provide (either directly or as contracted services) birth to age 3 early intervention services as an opportunity to develop model parent/child care and early learner provider/school partnerships for serving infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays.

## Endorsement of Education Structures Subgroup's Parent Engagement Ideas

As part of its deliberations, the Education Structures Subgroup of the K-12 Advisory Committee discussed ways for schools to help parents and families be engaged in their child's education. Two specific ideas discussed were: (1) Every school should have a written plan on how to meaningfully and effectively engage families and students in culturally sensitive ways, and (2) Every school should have a family support/outreach advocate team, with outreach efforts at the elementary school level including child care and early learning providers as well as parents. The Joint Workgroup is pleased to endorse these ideas.

## Issues for Further Exploration

Finally, the Joint Workgroup would like to note two major issues which need further exploration.

The first is the question of what kind of structural change – if any – in the organization and delivery of birth through age 8 (3<sup>rd</sup> grade) services would promote a more seamless, beneficial experience for children and families. The Joint Workgroup spent considerable time discussing whether the more deliberate connection of a child's pre-kindergarten and school environments (with a focus on the transition years of age 3 through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) would be beneficial. Given the lack of time to explore what this "early learner system" would in fact look like (in particular, how the pre-school-age services would be provided), and concerns about how this system would fit with services for children birth to age 3, the Joint Workgroup chose not to make any recommendations in this area.

The second issue needing broader, deeper exploration is early learning and K-3 teacher preparation and credentialing. Although the QRIS TAC is addressing part of this issue, there are important policy questions that go beyond the scope of the TAC's work but must be addressed if parents, child care and early learning provider, and K-12 educators are to achieve our common goal of school readiness. These issues include the need to attract persons of color into the early learning and K-12 teaching profession, the definition of the skills and knowledge needed by teachers of young children, and the implications of this for teacher preparation programs.